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The EU's double standards on Palestine and Ukraine

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Alvaro Oleart and Juan Roch argue the EU's "othering" of Palestine demonstrates clear double standards when compared to Europe's treatment of Ukraine.

Ursula von der Leyen promised a “geopolitical” European Commission in 2019. She did not disappoint. Beyond the impact of COVID-19, von der Leyen’s time in office has been marked by two acute crises: the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Israel’s large-scale military offensive on Palestine following the deadly attacks perpetrated by

Hamas on 7 October 2023.

Although these are not entirely symmetrical conflicts and have their own political and historical particularities, there are strong similarities between them. They both feature a militarily powerful country (Russia and Israel) attacking a neighbouring nation (Ukraine and Palestine) with which it has historically unequal relations (which may even be conceived of as colonial).

However, despite these similarities, the EU's foreign policy response has been very different, as we detail in a [new study](#). To fully understand the EU's positioning and role in this conflict, and in the face of the massacre perpetrated by Israel, it is essential to look beyond the latest ceasefire agreement and analyse its precarious situation in the new global re-equilibrium.

The garden and the jungle

The asymmetric response to both conflicts highlights the contradictions of an EU whose foreign policy remains marked by the logic of “[the garden and the jungle](#)”, a racist metaphor used by Josep Borrell, High Representative for Foreign Affairs of the European Union between 2019 and 2024.

Ukraine is part of the “garden”: a predominantly white and Christian community with a status close to NATO and the EU. It is part of the “European family”, in von der Leyen’s own words. Supported by this idea, the EU provided political support, financial assistance and even helped develop Ukraine’s defence capabilities. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was invited to the European Parliament several times and EU leaders (including von der Leyen and Borrell) as well as many political leaders from EU member states visited Ukraine several times as a gesture of support for the country’s fight against the Russian

government.

Moreover, the EU not only supported the welcoming of millions of Ukrainian refugees but also imposed harsh sanctions against the Russian government as well as Russian companies and individuals connected to President Vladimir Putin. The latter has been singled out as responsible for “war crimes” due to attacks on hospitals and other civilian infrastructure. Indeed, in March 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) **issued an arrest warrant against Putin for war crimes**.

The ICC also issued a request for **an arrest warrant for war crimes and crimes against humanity against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** on 21 November 2024. However, in this case, the EU sided with Israel. Only Israeli leaders have been invited to speak in the European Parliament, and von der Leyen, together with President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola, even visited Israel and held a joint press conference with Israeli President Isaac Herzog on 13 October 2023.

Despite the large number of Palestinians killed by Israeli attacks in Gaza (and also in Lebanon and the West Bank, where settlers continue to expand), there has been little change in European foreign policy towards Israel. In March 2024, almost 200 civil society organisations **called for the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement**, as human rights and democratic principles are an essential component of the agreement. Despite these requests, the EU continues to maintain this agreement intact.

Moreover, while the narrative on Ukraine has a broad historical perspective around Soviet imperialism, in the case of Palestine, the chronology begins on 7 October 2023. It is as if nothing had happened before the Hamas attacks. Indeed, the “othering” is evident as there is a constant denial of Palestine as a political community (often speaking

only of “Gaza”, as if it were not part of a larger nation). Terms such as “Nakba”, “genocide”, “occupation”, “colonialism” or “apartheid” do not appear in the EU narrative. In line with this, Palestinian deaths appear as the consequence of a “tragedy”, a natural disaster with no apparent human causes.

Contradictions and paralysis

While this general narrative dominates in the EU, there have been some institutional counterweights at the European level. Josep Borrell – despite the unfortunate metaphor mentioned above – has rejected von der Leyen’s position on the issue. He has **publicly criticised the Commission President**, arguing in relation to her visit to Israel in October 2023 that “von der Leyen’s trip, with such a completely pro-Israeli position, without representing anyone but herself in a matter of international politics, has had a high geopolitical cost for Europe”.

He has also denounced the double standards of European foreign policy, which have led the EU to oppose the violation of human rights in some places and justify them in others. EU foreign policy must be agreed on by all member states, but Borrell, as High Representative for Foreign Affairs, played a key role in coordinating and seeking consensus. Spain, Belgium and Ireland are the states that have most positioned themselves on Borrell’s side.

In December 2024, Estonian Kaja Kallas replaced Borrell in the second von der Leyen Commission, which clearly shifted further to the right. Kallas has emerged as a strong defender of Ukraine in its resistance against Russia, but she has not had the same attitude towards Palestine. The EU now appears paralysed and unable to champion human rights coherently. It is a victim of its internal contradictions and its subordination to a global logic that it cannot or does not know how

to read – especially its relationship of dependence on the United States.

If a ceasefire is respected, the EU will probably be able to say that human rights and democracy are making headway in the face of bombs and thousands of dead civilians. The truth, beyond these proclamations, is that the EU's arguments about human rights increasingly lack credibility because they are so often used incoherently and with racist discretion. This allows those who do not really believe in human rights and democracy to use these terms to continue a massacre in the face of general confusion.

In contrast, a democratic European foreign policy would properly confront its own colonial past and present, moving beyond the logic of “the garden and the jungle”, hypocrisy and double standards. It is instructive that it was South Africa, and not the EU or any European country, that took Israel to the International Court of Justice on the grounds that it was committing genocide against Palestine.

The defence of human rights cannot be limited to certain communities. If it is, the EU will further erode international law and continue to reproduce the existing hierarchy between the global North and South. Rather than counterproductively pitting the struggles of Ukrainians and Palestinians against each other, European foreign policy should find ways to articulate bonds of solidarity across all anticolonial struggles.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying article in the [Journal of Common Market Studies](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPPO – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: © European Union

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